

The
PERFECT
COUPLE

...OR THE PERFECT LIE?



JACKIE KABLER

The Perfect Couple
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Chapter 1

It was the silence I noticed first. When Danny was around there was always noise, singing or humming, the tap-tapping of a laptop keyboard, the prolonged clatter of spoon against ceramic mug as he stirred his black coffee vigorously for far too long, in my view, for a man who didn't even take sugar in it – what was he stirring? But I loved it, his noisiness, despite my regular protestations to the contrary. I'd lived alone for far too long before Danny, and the constant clamour made me feel connected, alive. Happy. So that evening, as I pushed the front door open and slid the key out of the lock, expecting a welcoming yell from the living room or to see, within seconds, his grinning face peering around the kitchen door, disappointment hit me like an icy wave.

'Danny? Danny, I'm home. Where are you?'

I could tell even as I spoke that he wasn't in but, flicking the lights on and dumping my overnight bag on the table by the door, I began a quick tour of the house anyway, my footsteps echoing on the polished parquet of the hall floor. My frown deepened as I pushed each door open, the rooms dark and empty. Where was he? He'd promised, the previous evening when he'd emailed to say goodnight, that he'd be here when I got back, that he'd cook dinner. Even promised, I remembered as I headed for the kitchen, to have a bottle of my favourite cava chilling; a welcome home, Friday night treat. *If he'd forgotten ...*

'Dammit, Danny. Seriously?'

I glared at the contents of the fridge. It looked exactly as I'd left it on Thursday morning – a half-full milk container, a block of cheese with one corner hacked off, a pack of sausages with four missing, the four we'd eaten for breakfast before I'd headed off on my latest press trip. No cava. No sign of any fresh food. He hadn't even gone *shopping*? What was going on? Had something happened at work, delaying him? He'd told me he'd be finishing at lunchtime that day, for once, that he'd have plenty of time to do the supermarket run for a change, save me doing it on Saturday morning as I usually did, while he stayed at home to run the vacuum round and flick a duster over the shelves. A break from the little routine we'd quickly fallen into, *happily* fallen into, since we'd moved to Bristol, and into the beautiful house in up-market Clifton. It hadn't always been like that, but when we moved he'd said he wanted to help around the house more, do more of the

chores I hated, and I hadn't argued. We'd only been in our new home for three weeks, but the words 'domestic bliss' pretty much summed things up, cringeworthy as it sounded even to me.

'You can have a lie-in on Saturday, Gem. You'll be knackered after all that debauchery at your fancy spa hotel,' he'd said over our full English, reaching across the breakfast table to wipe a splodge of ketchup from my bottom lip, his finger soft against my skin.

'It's *work*,' I'd retorted, wagging my fork at him, then smiling as I speared another piece of black pudding. 'Well ... maybe a teeny bit of debauchery too though.'

'I don't doubt it. You journalists, and your hard-livin', hard-drinkin' ways.'

His accent, normally soft west of Ireland, was suddenly full-on Moore Street Market, Dublin, and I swallowed quickly and laughed.

'Yeah, right. We'll have a few drinks, but we'll all be in bed by eleven, I guarantee it. Too many exhausted mummies in the group now. A night away without the kids means they can finally get a decent night's sleep for once.'

He raised his thick, dark eyebrows – once a monobrow, until I'd finally pinned him to the bed one day, brandishing my tweezers – and I laughed again at his comically exaggerated expression of disbelief.

'Oh, shut up.'

'I didn't say a word!'

He'd leapt from his chair then, dragging me from my seat and into a hug, whispering into my hair.

'I'll miss you. But have a great time. You deserve it.'

So where are you now, Danny? I slammed the fridge door and reached into the pocket of my zebra print coat for my mobile, then remembered. Bugger. There'd been some sort of delay with Danny's new workplace providing him with a company mobile phone – it would, they'd promised, finally be ready for Monday – and as he'd handed in his old one when he'd left his previous job, he was temporarily phone-less. For a moment, I considered ringing his office, asking them if he'd been made to work late, then sighed and decided against it. A bit much, probably, when he'd only been in the job for such a short time, to have his wife calling, wondering where he was. Email, then? He still had his tablet, and emailing had worked reasonably well over the past few weeks when we'd needed to get hold of each other. We both had Skype too, for emergencies, although we hadn't

needed to use it so far, and just like calling his office, I thought Skyping him might be a bit intrusive. Yes, email.

I perched on the edge of one of the dining chairs and tapped out a message.

I'm home. Where are you? And, more to the point, where's my dinner? And my FIZZ!? G

xx

I hit send, checked the time, and stood up with a sigh. Just after seven. I'd go and unpack, have a nice hot shower, change. We could get some food delivered instead of cooking, and maybe Danny could call in at the office on his way home to pick up some bubbly, I thought. I glanced around the kitchen, noticing that at least he'd washed up, wiped down the surfaces, replaced the chopping knives neatly in their wooden block. Everything was spotless in fact, a faint smell of bleach in the air, even the stainless-steel cooker hood gleaming. I felt my mild irritation subsiding. It would be work, that was all. It wasn't his fault he'd been delayed. He'd be home soon. Slipping my coat from my shoulders, I headed back down the hall to retrieve my bags.

Chapter 2

‘Holy cow. It’s like looking at brothers. Coincidence, or not? What do you make of that, guv?’

Detective Sergeant Devon Clarke glanced over his shoulder. Behind him, Detective Chief Inspector Helena Dickens nodded slowly, indigo eyes fixed on the two photos on the board.

‘I dunno. Not yet, anyway. But yes, they do look spookily similar. Weird, eh?’

She looked at her watch. Just after seven. She sighed and turned to the room, wincing slightly as she felt a twinge in her lower back. Last night’s run had been too long and too fast, she thought.

‘OK, gather round everyone. I’m sorry to do this to you all on a Friday evening, but with a second murder on our hands now I’m going to have to ask you to work right through the weekend, as I’m sure you’ve already guessed. Let’s just go through what we’ve got so far, so it’s all clear in everyone’s minds, and then I’ll distribute jobs.’

She waited, turning back to scan the board as chairs scraped and feet shuffled; then the room fell silent, the rain which had started to fall an hour ago beating an urgent tattoo against the windows, the air thick with the smell of stale coffee.

‘Thanks. Right, well I know some of you have just been brought into Bristol today to swell our numbers, so thank you for that. I’m DCI Helena Dickens, senior investigating officer. This is DS Devon Clarke.’

She waved a hand towards Devon, who dipped his head.

‘It’s been a while since Avon Police has had two murders on its hands in such a short time frame, so we’re about to get very busy. There’s nothing at the moment to suggest that the two killings are linked, although we’re still waiting on the forensics report on the latest. But ...’ she paused and exchanged glances with Devon, ‘well, let’s start at the beginning. Devon, can you take us through what we know about Mervin Elliott?’

‘Sure.’

Devon nodded, and cleared his throat.

‘OK. This is Mervin Elliott.’

He pointed to the photograph on the top left corner of the board.

‘Thirty-two years old, men’s clothing shop manager – one of those trendy places in Cabot Circus. Single, heterosexual, no children, lived alone

in an apartment down at the harbourside. His body was found on Clifton Down by a dog walker just over two weeks ago, early on the morning of Wednesday, the thirteenth of February. Here, just off Ladies Mile, near Stoke Road.’ He pointed at a map of The Downs, the vast public open space to the north of the affluent suburb of Clifton. ‘His body was half hidden by shrubs, a bush, something like that. Time of death estimated to be about ten or eleven hours earlier, so between seven and eight the night before, Tuesday, the twelfth. Cause of death, blow to the head. No other significant injuries. No murder weapon found.’

He paused, rubbed his nose and continued.

‘According to everyone we’ve spoken to so far, he was a nice, normal guy. Worked hard, single as I said; his mates said he’d been on the odd date recently, usually women he met online, but hadn’t found anyone he wanted to get serious with. Sociable bloke though, liked a night out by all accounts, but wasn’t a drug user or even a particularly big drinker. He was big into fitness, member of a gym – that big 24-hour one at the harbour, near his flat. Looked after himself. No criminal record. No obvious motive at all for his murder. Looked like he’d been out running the night he was killed – he was wearing trainers and exercise gear when his body was found. But he had a pretty nice sports watch on, and a decent phone in his pocket, and they weren’t touched. Parts of The Downs get their share of doggers and so on at night, people cruising for action, but there was no sign of recent sexual activity on the body, no evidence he was there for anything like that. And so far, we’ve not found any witnesses to the attack. It would have been dark at that time of course. But so far, we have very little to go on. No forensics of any use. Nada.’

A phone suddenly trilled on a desk at the back of the room, and Devon waited while one of the young detective constables sprinted to grab it, answering it in hushed tones then grimacing at Devon.

‘Nothing major,’ she mouthed.

Devon nodded and turned back to the board.

‘OK, so that’s Mervin Elliott. This ...’ he gestured at the photograph to the right of the first, ‘is Ryan Jones. His body was found yesterday morning, Thursday, the twenty-eighth of February, in a lane between two houses on Berkeley Rise. That’s here, just off Saville Road.’

He ran his finger across the map.